THE OGDEN STANDARD

A MAKER OF THE BOOK OF LIFE

A Visit to Abraham Cahan, Who Is the Father Confessor, the Court of Last Resort of the Marvellous East Side.

BY GARNET WARREN.

New York, Saturday.—

NEWSPAPERS are scenarios of the dramas of life. They are the short records of tragedies and comedies which are true. What we know as large metropolitan dailies contain many of them. The newspapers of the east side contain more. Why?

"Because," said Mr. Abraham Cahan, the editor of the Jewish Daily Forward, "men are greater in numbers and emotions here. The crowded and changing conditions of east side life intensify effects; and the Jewish race is essentially dramatic."

Mr. Cahan himself is about forty years old—nervous, alert, quick moving, an obvious dynamo of energy. He is indeed a remarkable man. A novelist of distinction, a contributor to the highest class of American magazines and with a reportorial experience upon American newspapers, he deliberately stepped out of that arena eight years ago to conduct a small newspaper on the east side because he conceived the work to be done there was the more vital.

I visited him recently, being curious as to the duties of an east side editor. I wondered wherein he differed from his more decorative brethren of a great daily.

"In many things," commenced Mr. Cahan, with a slightly foreign accent, "but chiefly in his opportunities for studying humanity direct. In the great daily the editor is exactly—an editor. On the east side he is an editor, a rabbi, a lawgiver, a sympathizer and a friend. He must be all these, in fact, if he would be an editor; for the east side is, above all things, human."

Mr. Cahan's speech is a duplicate of his appearance—eager, quick moving, tense.

"First tell me something about the organization of the typical east side newspaper," I said; "something about its contents and makeup now."

"So far as news is concerned," said Mr. Cahan, laughing, "I'm afraid we're a rather negligible quantity. Our special correspondent is mostly the office boy, who buys the last edition from the news stands. In fact, we mostly 'lift' what news we print—although we always credit the newspaper we steal from," he added, conscientiously.

"You see," he went on, "the most essential point of difference is necessitated by our readers. The Jewish east sider is more purely literary in his taste than the average reader of the American daily. The Jew is less interested in things than in theories. He likes discussions, debates, essays, poems—things, in fact, which are not news. Sporting pages do not interest him. We, accordingly, carry each day a couple of pages of what you would term 'special articles,' although they are different kinds of special articles from those which your readers like. We carry lots of translations of the most famous foreign literary work. We carry criticisms and criticisms of our criticisms. In fact, the Jewish reader considers it his particular privilege to criticise original articles which we print, to criticise them both from the point of view of the story and the point of view of art. He has, indeed, a trained analytical faculty which the average American reader does not possess."

"Then, generally, the journalistic methods are quite different from those of—the others."

I vaguely indicated an uptown direction.

"Oh, quite," said Mr. Cahan, smiling, and then, ruminating, "Where shall I begin?"

The Human Element.

"Well, the great point of difference is the human one," said Mr. Cahan. "We are brought into more intimate touch with people than you are. You merely touch the facts. We have to touch the facts and the hearts and the minds. We've got to make the east side people feel that they've not only a newspaper, but that the newspaper is kin to them, part of their lives and of themselves. In fact," he concluded more colloquially, "you've got to help your reader out."

"In such a manner as?"——

Mr. Cahan crossed his feet—feet covered with those elastic sided boots which are as much a part of the great east side as the strange, mystic characters written upon the paper between us.

"Well, the gallery of deserting husbands," he volunteered. "You see the changed and changing conditions of life here tend sometimes to lessen moral responsibility. Men desert their wives. The wives come to us with descriptions and photographs and we publish them. That's what we call the 'Gallery of Husbands.' We get letters from all over the country from people who recognize the men.

"'That fellow's here at such and such an address,' one will say. So we get the husbands. They come then and state their case. They usually say they can't live with their wives. 'That isn't necessary,' we say, 'but you must support them.'

"Then wives come," he continued, "who want husbands discovered. There was one here yesterday. She had a pretty little girl with her, four years old. 'Please come back,' she wrote. 'Your little Becky's here crying for her papa. She sent you these kisses with her own hand.'

"The child put little crosses at the bottom of the letter. Then the woman said:—'He's crazy for that child. When he sees that it'll break his heart!'"

Mr. Cahan rose and looked at his watch. "I'm afraid you're rather late," said he.

He looked out of the door. "Between two and four each day," he continued, "people come here for advice, but I'm afraid they're all gone to-day."

There was one woman there, however, shawled, dark, typical of the east side. Mr. Cahan approached her. The woman spoke eagerly, with little stiff gesticulations. Mr. Cahan shook his head. She spoke again, gesticulated again. Mr. Cahan shook his head once more. Then he commenced to speak. He spoke for five minutes, perhaps. She listened at first without any indication of feeling; then, nodding energetically many times, arose and went. Mr. Cahan followed her to the stairs and called over to her. She answered, nodding energetically still.

"That woman's husband," said he, "left her two years ago. She has not heard from him. He took the $800 which they had saved. He left without a word. Yesterday he wrote from Argentina, saying that he wanted her to come to him. He said that he loved her and couldn't do without her. He didn't send any money, but she wants to go; says she loves him yet. I told her not to go."

"Why?" I asked.

"Well," he said, "business isn't very good for the stranger in Argentina, but there's a large white slave trade down there. This man may want to traffic in her. I told her that. 'If he loves you,' I said, 'he'll be willing to come to you. Tell him you'll forgive him if he comes here to you, but don't go to him. If he won't he doesn't love you.' That got her. So she's going to write as I suggested."

The Family Secrets.

He led the way back into his little office, with the single desk and the two chairs to relieve it of its bareness.

"Another feature which would be novel to the ordinary American reader is the family discussions which we print. These are very popular on the east side. A man and his wife quarrel, for instance. The man wants to give up the store, the wife wants to retain it. They can't agree. 'Well, we'll write to the Forward,' says one, 'and let it judge.' So the man writes a letter telling his reasons for wanting to give up the store and the wife writes her reasons for wanting to keep it. We publish both letters. And the remarkable thing about such letters is that there are seldom assertions and almost invariably arguments. When the thing has been thoroughly ventilated we decide, and everybody invariably accepts the decision. The Jew regards his newspaper as Englishmen sometimes regard theirs. He invests it with some of the qualities of a pulpit utterance."

"And some of the dramatic problems which you are called upon to solve as editor and humanitarian in general?" I asked.

"There was one in particular a few days ago," said he, without hesitation. "The man was intelligent and about forty-five. He was poorly dressed. He came in here to find out whether it was permissible for him to marry a deaf mute."

"You have a wide scope for advice," I suggested.

"The circumstances were these," continued Mr. Cahan. "The girl was the daughter of a Hebrew who had succeeded. He was worth about $60,000. The daughter, being deaf and mute, found it impossible to marry. The father, wishing to settle her in life, offered $10,000 with her as a dowry. Here was the problem of the man who came to me:—

"'I'm a failure in life,' he said. 'I tried peddling and failed. I tried keeping a little store and failed. I tried as salesman and failed. I am very poor. I make only $5 a week. There is nothing before me. Now, here is this $10,000 offered if I will only marry this girl. I feel that I ought to take it. But I have a doubt in me; so I came to you.'

"Well, we told him that he ought not to take it. 'You would not love her,' we said. 'It would be wrong.'

"He looked out of the window which you see and pointed to the thousands of women sitting there in the park opposite.

"'Do you mean to say that all those women married for love? No; they married for homes. They made marriages of convenience, and yet they are good wives. The rich do it every day. I would be a good husband—I promise you that—once I married her. Is not a marriage justified by other things than love? A man is lonely, say. His nature is becoming warped by solitude. Is he not justified in marrying for association? Whether you speak by mouth or fingers—it is the same. Intelligent association is what you need.'

"'It would be selling yourself,' I insisted. 'You are marrying her for her $10,000. You are selling yourself as much as the woman in the street. Failure or no failure, a man should not sell himself for money.'

"Well, he went away and said that he wouldn't do it," said Mr. Cahan. "An argument like that might seem ineffective if used with the ordinary man, but the Jew of the east side has a very deep feeling of responsibility to his inmost ideals."

The Book of Life.

Mr. Cahan paused and excused himself for a moment while he went to another silent, shawled figure which waited patiently on a chair at the end of the large room where men wrote at desks. He spoke with her for five minutes and returned.

"But our most striking feature" he remarked in continuation, "if you like to call it that, is 'The Book of Life.' It is made of letters from the people, which tell their problems; speak their tragedies. We print three columns of these a day. We give the people advice if they want it. It has, perhaps, been due as much to this as anything that we have grown so. We get thirty of these letters a day, and select about three from them."

"How did you induce them to understand what you wanted at first?"

"Well, it was difficult," he answered. "I addressed a letter to the people in the first place. I said:—'You have life. Give it to us. There are great tragedies and comedies of life in your tenement houses. If I could tear the roofs from them I could see those tragedies and comedies; but I can't. You must help me to know.'

"Well, at first they couldn't understand. They sent in long letters with those artificial climaxes for which the magazines have such tender regard—exaggerated emotions, with no simplicity, no truth. So I tried again. I wrote a letter myself. It was an artificial egg in the editorial hencoop to induce the real kind. Then the stream commenced to pour in—letters throbbing with pain; weighted with the primal burdens of men and women—problems of living humanity written in tears."

Mr. Cahan turned to a file. "Here it is, you see." He indicated the page, which to me was an unintelligibility. "Here is one," he said, formulating the skeleton of it slowly.

"He loves a girl. He is a cripple. He is conscious of his deformity and is ashamed to speak to her. The others understand and laugh at him so that he is ashamed to show himself in the street. He hides himself in his room. He says that he does not know what to do. He asks us."

Mr. Cahan's moving finger passed along.

"Here is a boarder who lived in a family and quarrelled with the woman. That was a year ago. He left and started a rumor that she was unfaithful to her husband. Now his conscience bothers him. He is sorry. 'I hate myself,' he says. 'I want you to publish this woman's name and print that I call myself a liar. This woman was a good woman. I was only angry and I lied.'"

"In fact," continued Mr. Cahan, "it is remarkable what a part conscience plays here. There was a letter the other day from a man who bought some fake jewelry for a dollar or so and sold it to a woman for fifty. You know"—Mr. Cahan pantomimed the man who comes up in the street with the furtive air and the piece of jewelry concealed beneath his coat. "Well, the man went away and prospered. Now he's worth $10,000 and his conscience bothers him. He wants to find the woman so that he can give back the $50. He says that if she will name some little incident connected with the sale he will send it back. He feels bad."

Mr. Cahan consulted the files again.

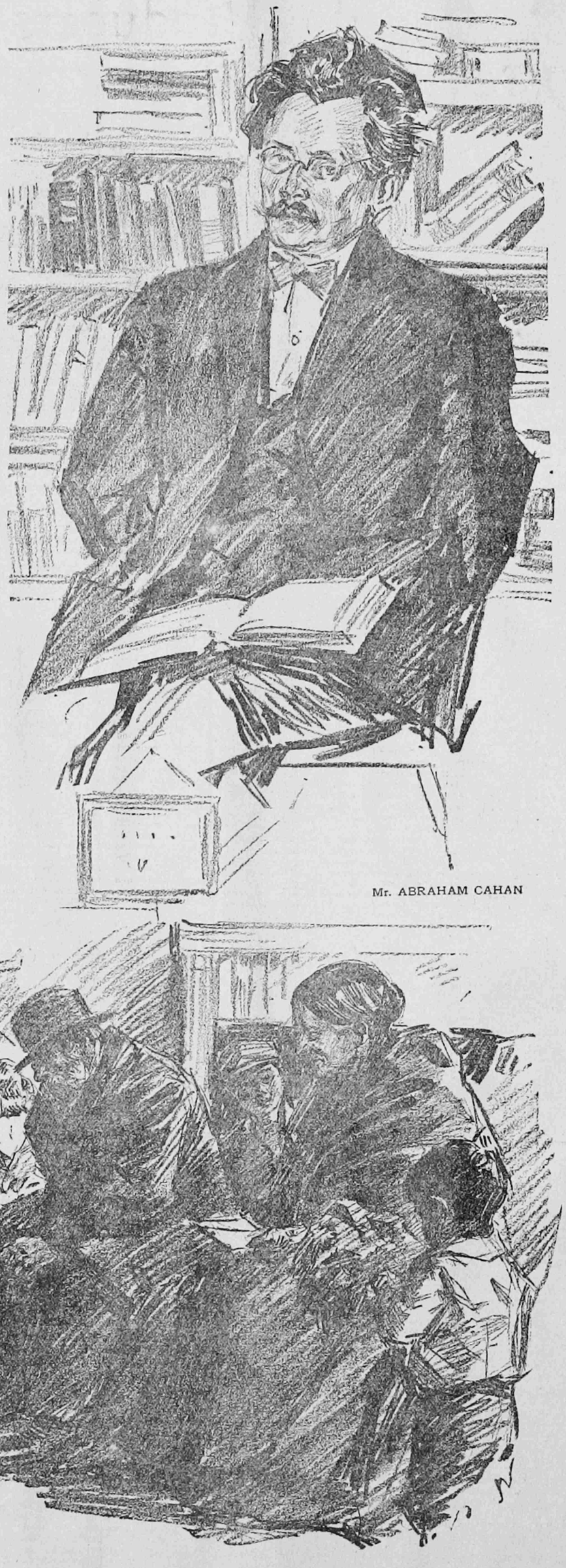
"Here's a woman who had her watch stolen," he went on. "She knows the man who stole it. He is her friend. She likes and respects him. He is a good man and not a thief, she writes. He was only tempted, for he is very, very poor. She wants him to know that this is how she feels. She wants her watch back, but she does not want to hurt his feelings. She knows he has pawned it. 'Let him only leave the ticket in some place in which I can get it,' she says, 'and it will be all right. Then let him come to me just as he always did. Let him not be ashamed. I will not remind him of it—not in a look or a word. It will be just as if I did not know. Just let him leave the ticket at the place.'"

He turned over the files. "Here is another one," he said. "This is from a woman. She and her husband lived happily up to a year ago. Then he began to conceive a suspicion that she was saving money secretly. He would search in her stockings. He is always on the hunt for money in unlikely places—places in which he thinks she might have hidden it. She cannot convince him that she is not saving any. It is a source of misery to both of them."

He turned over pages, pages—each a chapter in his Book of Life. "Here is a girl in love with a man twenty years her senior. They were friends in the old country. They worked together. Her love is based upon affection and esteem, but she doubts her heart. Her head tells her that there is too great a disparity in ages. Yet she is lonely and sure of his affection. He is so good to her—so tender. What shall she do?

"Here is a man who had to fly from Germany. He is successful here. Yet the yearning is strong in him to see the places that he knew when he was young. He knows that he will be arrested and imprisoned if he goes, yet he seems unable to stop himself. He asks us to help him."

And so Mr. Cahan continued. The dramas of the lives of the poor came with the prodigality of a magician with a magic hat. There were far more than I could use. So I told him—this man who had called them forth—thanked him and went. And as I stood at the head of the stairs I stepped aside for three shawled women.



Mr. ABRAHAM CAHAN

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